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SUBJECT: OLYMPIC TORCH IN VIETNAM

REF: (A) Hanoi 494 (B) Hanoi 493

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11. (SBU) Summary: The Olympic torch arrived in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) on April 28 in advance of the planned torch relay set to begin at six o'clock p.m. on April 29. Despite anti-China protests planned by activists in both HCMC and Hanoi (Ref A), a heavy police presence will almost certainly ensure that the actual torch relay encounters no serious problems. Fans with Chinese flags were allowed to march in HCMC on April 29 ahead of the torch's arrival. Vietnam's official media have given the torch's presence in Vietnam positive attention, while online fora have carried pieces critical of the relay and of China. Vietnam's protests are only indirectly concerned with Tibet; anger against China is focused on Beijing's actions with regard to the South China Sea. End summary.

Flag-Waving Fans Allowed in HCMC

12. (SBU) The torch arrived in HCMC, its only stop in Vietnam and 19th stop overall, on April 28 with a run through HCMC set late in the day on April 29. In the run-up to the torch relay event, there was talk online and rumors of planned protests in front of the Chinese consulate, Opera House and other key public sites. Calls to boycott sponsors such as Coca-Cola, Lenovo and Samsung have also been circulating on the Internet.

13. (SBU) Police presence in HCMC was heavy during the day on April 29, with up to 100 police officers of various units in the central area near Notre Dame Cathedral, Reunification Palace and the Chinese Consulate in HCMC. On the sidewalk opposite the Chinese Consulate, plainclothes and uniformed police were not allowing anyone to stop in the area.

14. (SBU) Four small groups of approximately 30 people, apparently Chinese nationals, conducted peaceful marches through central HCMC waving Chinese flags and wearing white T-shirts with the Beijing Olympics logo. A group of between 35 and 50 people wearing white T-shirts and waving Chinese flags gathered in the lawn near the Reunification Palace. Police watched them closely but left them alone. The group walked on in the direction of the Opera House, where a dais for the torch relay ceremony has been in place since the morning.

Hanoi: Anti-China Protesters Reportedly Arrested

15. (SBU) Anti-Chinese protests in Hanoi were reportedly planned for both the Chinese Embassy and Hoan Kiem Lake, where families of Vietnamese fishermen killed by the Chinese in the South China Sea were allegedly planning to rally. (Note: Hoan Kiem Lake in downtown Hanoi plays a prominent role in Vietnam's legendary struggles to gain independence from China. End Note.) On the morning of April

29 the road in front of the Chinese Embassy (site of previous protests against Chinese actions in the South China Sea) was blocked off to traffic by a few dozen uniformed police, including helmeted riot police. There was no indication of people rallying or being arrested at either site.

¶16. (SBU) There were press reports that at least six people were detained in Hanoi and that two men hoisted banners with the words "Beijing 2008" and a design depicting the Olympic rings as handcuffs at Hanoi's central market before being hustled away by dozens of uniformed and plainclothes police officers. Unconfirmed blog reports put the number of those arrested much higher.

Official Media Positive, Bloggers Less So

¶17. (SBU) The Ho Chi Minh City portion of the Olympic torch relay has drawn a great deal of attention from the Vietnamese media. The official state-run outlets have highlighted Vietnam's inclusion in this global event and have reported officials vowing to ensure its success. These outlets, unsurprisingly, did not cover any protests or challenges encountered during relay stops in other countries. And according to media contacts, editors of state-run media organizations have been instructed to cover the subject sparingly, focusing on the major kickoff event.

¶18. (SBU) In contrast, online fora and popular blog sites have carried numerous pieces critical of the relay and of China. Just days ago, a popular HCMC blogger Dieu Cay posted a protest of China's plan to put disputed South China Sea islands under Chinese administration. Cay was subsequently arrested for tax evasion, and more than 20 "illegal" websites have been pulled from the by Vietnamese authorities. While bloggers and members of online forums have exercised more restraint since those events, they continue to discuss the torch relay, often in negative tones.

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Anti-China Protests in Vietnam Not About Tibet

¶19. (SBU) In contrast to anti-Chinese protests the torch has encountered elsewhere, those in Vietnam are not directly focused on Tibet but rather on perceived Chinese "bullying" of Vietnam in the South China Sea. Indeed, there was a rumor in the Vietnamese blogosphere that China had intended to include in the torch run the disputed Spratly and Paracel Islands.

¶110. (SBU) The situation in Tibet does, however, have relevance in Vietnam as another case of Chinese "bullying" and an indication of how the Chinese could (or would like to) treat Vietnam. Vietnamese blogs have made the case that China's claims to Tibet are not dissimilar to claims that China is making on the Spratlys and Paracels. More importantly, China could make the same "Tibet style" claims to most of Vietnam since there were times -- most of Vietnam's history -- when Vietnamese rulers and governments were either directly subservient to China or deferred to China on major matters.

¶111. Comment: Anti-Chinese sentiment constitutes a challenge for Vietnam's leaders. While many of them share in the anger generated by Beijing's actions to limit foreign companies' collaborations with Vietnam in exploiting offshore oil resources and Beijing's move late last year to create a civil jurisdiction covering the islands, Hanoi also knows that Beijing will react swiftly and sharply to any "provocation," which would definitely include allowing protesters to besmirch the relay. In addition, given these limitations, Hanoi also fears seeming impotent in the face of challenges by Vietnamese (including critics of the regime) that it cannot or will not stand up to China. Its response, unsurprisingly, is to stifle protesters and officially pretend that all is well.

¶112. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen HCMC.

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